

Political reform, the United States and the Arab-Israeli conflict

Nathan J. Brown, Senior Associate

**The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
and**

**Professor of Political Science and International
Affairs**

The George Washington University

There seem to be two constants in Arab politics: authoritarian government and the conflict with Israel. While there is occasional movement in both arenas (indeed, at the present, there is rare movement on both), pessimists who predict stasis are more often than not correct. Is there a relationship between the two constants? To what degree have Arab governments used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other conflicts as an excuse for limiting a more pluralistic government?

Until fairly recently, there was another constant as well: the United States opposed creation of a Palestinian state. American opposition to the idea eased during the 1990s, but it was not until the Bush Administration that “Palestine” as a place sometimes replaced “the Palestinians” as a people in official parlance and American support for a state of Palestine became explicit. What is the impact on popular opinion within the Middle East of American statements in support of a Palestinian state and the peaceful co-existence of Israel and Palestine?

These two questions are based on rival cynical assumptions that political reform and the Arab-Israeli conflict are related—or rather that the inaction on both fronts is related. According to one cynical assumption, the conflict provides an opportunity to existing regimes to suppress or ignore their own populations in the name of the Palestinian cause. In the second cynical view, the United States actually undermines its supposed support for democratic change by ignoring the conflict that matters the most to people from the region. Neither cynical view is accurate.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Excuse for Inaction or Catalyst for Change?

The view that Arab regimes use the conflict with Israel as a domestic weapon—deployed to distract their own populations from domestic failures and justify severe security restrictions on politics—is an old one, often cited inside and outside the region. It is probably most often heard within the United States by those opposing more active American diplomacy to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to this view, tremendous rhetorical emphasis on the Palestinian cause by Arab leaders should not be taken too seriously, at least as an indication of their true agendas: governments that cannot deliver either freedom or economic benefits to their

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citizens hold out Palestine to redirect domestic anger outwards toward perceived foreign enemies. The conflict with Israel is used to mask depression at home.

What is odd about this view is that it is frequently expressed in only slightly different form in the Arab world: existing governments are charged with pretending to care about Palestine in order to silence domestic critics. As I heard one Palestinian say to a gathering of intellectuals from other Arab countries—some of whom maintained that reform was not possible with a resolution of the Palestine problem: “Stop using us as an excuse.”

Yet such views are problematic on several levels: it explains neither the historical origin of repressive mechanisms nor the current manner of their deployment. Historically, the structures of repression date back before the Arab-Israeli conflict. Emergency laws, special court systems, and extensive internal security apparatuses were often established during the colonial period. The state of emergency in Egypt, for instance, dates back to World War Two—a result of British pressure to support the war effort—not to the 1948 war. The law on which the state of emergency is based is a lineal descendent of one introduced during World War One, also by the British.

Nor can the wave of military intervention that afflicted the region, beginning in Iraq in the 1930s and generally subsiding in the 1970s—be fit easily into the view that Arab states use the conflict with Israel as an excuse. It is undoubtedly true that military failure in 1948 sharply undermined the legitimacy of civilian regimes in Egypt and Syria, helping to contribute to their replacement. But the military regimes that were established in Damascus in 1949 and Cairo in 1952 did not place Israel high on their priority list at first (and even expressed some interest in attempts to negotiate peace).

By the late 1950s that began to change, but again in a way that did not fit the supposed pattern. Some Arab states—like Jordan and later Lebanon—came under severe domestic pressure because segments of the population charged that governments were failing to address themselves to the conflict with Israel. By the late 1960s, leftist intellectuals throughout the region saw dramatic political change as the necessary ingredient before military victory could be contemplated. In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab states began to stake out far more conciliatory poses towards a negotiated solution to the conflict, often in the face of some domestic opposition.

It is not merely history that should lead us to question the cynics. The current pattern of repression fails to fit the cynical argument that Arab regimes use the conflict to their own advantage. Since the 1980s, Islamists have borne the brunt of state repression. They are far more likely than others to be detained without charges, tried in security or military courts, executed, harassed, and have their newspapers banned. Existing regimes justify their moves against Islamists in all sorts of terms—they are combating terrorism, fighting for tolerance, eliminating extremism, and providing for stability. But nowhere is the Arab-Israeli conflict used as a primary justification. Not even in Palestine does the cynical view hold: when the Palestinian

Authority has moved against Hamas, it has done so in the name of law and order, too embarrassed to link any steps to the peace process.

Over the past year, the pattern of existing regimes has sometimes been the precise opposite of the cynical view: rather than using menacing rhetoric to distract domestic critics, some states (most notably Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) have used conciliatory stances to distract international critics. Syria has evinced an interest in negotiations with Israel in order to lessen foreign pressure for political change inside the country; Egypt has stepped forward with helpful diplomacy on the Israeli-Palestinian front just as Hosni Mubarak seeks another term in office through heavy-handed measures; Jordan has maintained peaceful relations with Israel while moving sternly against its professional associations. The pattern is not restricted to front-line states: Tunisia invited Ariel Sharon to visit as the Bush Administration ratcheted up democratization rhetoric. Recently some of these steps have been viewed in Washington as transparent (though not all; the Jordanian moves have been greeted with silence), but even when the underlying motivations are clear, the maneuvers still seem to succeed at least in part.

Perhaps the problem with the cynical view that Arab regimes exploit the conflict is that it is not cynical enough. Half a century of emergency measures, restrictions on political life, political repression, and authoritarianism have hardly resulted in a system of Arab states that can confront Israel on the battlefield. If Arab regimes wished to justify their domestic sins by foreign threats, they would have trouble explaining their inability to confront those threats.

In some ways, the Arab-Israeli conflict has increased rather than decreased pressures for democratization in the region, though in ways that are difficult to measure. Since the 1960s, the inability of Arab regimes to deliver on any foreign policy goals has steadily eroded their legitimacy. The heady arguments of the late 1960s—that the way to liberate Palestine is to work for revolution in Jordan or in other Arab states—are no longer heard (except occasionally in Islamist circles). But a less radical version of that argument—that emergency and authoritarian measures have brought policy failures rather than national rejuvenation—is now accepted throughout the region. And on occasion, the Arab-Israeli conflict can increase pressure on regimes by giving armchair oppositions an issue where their criticisms can find some resonance in broader popular concerns.

In most countries of the region, questions of political reform and democratization are primarily domestic in nature. But on occasions when residents of Arab societies cast their eye towards the conflict with Israel, they are more rather than less likely to demand political reform at home.

American Support for a Palestinian State: Answering a Popular Demand?

If Arab publics have become increasingly concerned with the Palestinian issue, will recent American support for a Palestinian state help win over opinion in a part of the world where American policy has provoked extremely strong opposition?

Surprisingly, the bold statements of the Bush Administration supporting a Palestinian state initially escaped much notice in the Arab world. It came at the beginning of the intifada, when the drama of daily violence attracted more attention than diplomatic maneuvering. Since it was not coupled with any bold initiative—and indeed seemed to coincide with an American effort to scale down its involvement in the conflict—American endorsement of a Palestinian state attracted little attention. Several of the Bush Administration's pronouncements on the conflict have struck many in the region as double-edged at best and disingenuous at worst. President Bush's June 2002 address promises support for Palestinian reform but also a demand for a new leadership; the endorsement of the Road Map was accompanied not by an American diplomatic initiative over the Arab-Israeli conflict but by an invasion of Iraq.

Absent any attempt to address final status issues—settlements, refugees, Jerusalem, and borders—Palestinians (and others in the broader Arab world) are likely to be very suspicious of American policy, quick to find signs of hypocrisy and insincerity. It is true that over the past few months, there has been some sign of a softening of Palestinian skepticism, at least at the official level. American statements on one final status issue—settlements—have grown stronger, though they still confuse even those they are intended to please. More remarkable was Bush's statement in the 2005 State of the Union address that he would request one-third of a billion dollars—a huge sum in a small area that has already received enormous amounts of aid—to support Palestinian reform.

The slight thaw in official Palestinian attitudes toward the United States has not seeped out into the broader Arab world. And indeed, it would be a surprise if there were any sudden changes in attitudes. In much of the Arab world, the idea of a Palestinian state lying peacefully alongside an Israeli one sparks great skepticism. This is not necessarily because of objection in principle to recognition of Israel—though such objections are still very much heard in some circles. Instead, the broader attitude is less rigid but may be just as difficult to change—that Israel is inherently warlike or expansionistic and therefore would never allow a viable Palestinian state.

Such a view—while probably seriously out of step with Israeli public opinion—is based on interpretation of years of history. Complaining that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy (as indeed it probably is, at least in part) will have little effect over the short term.

That does not mean that more vigorous and successful American diplomacy on the Arab-Israeli front will have no effect on politics in the region. The real change in many Arab countries over the past five years of conflict has not been so much in hardening long-term attitudes towards Israel (in some circles, these have actually

softened) but in making the issue far more salient, even visceral, in virtually all levels of society. There is simply far more attention paid to events in the West Bank and Gaza, and those events are often fit—fairly or not—into a fairly coherent story of cruel oppression and valiant resistance to oppression.

A cease-fire accompanied by more active diplomacy will not change many minds in the short term, but it may lead them to focus less on the conflict.

Conclusion

Over the last generation, politics in the Arab world has seen much motion but little change. Egypt has had the same president for almost a quarter-century; the Libyan leader has ruled for over one third of a century; it has been over three decades since Syria has had a president not named al-Asad. The frustration borne of stagnation has led to an air of political cynicism prevailing among those who live in or study the region. This has led to an odd consensus: that Arab rulers do not really care about the Arab-Israeli conflict and that political change and reform is hostage to a contest between Israelis and Palestinians that cannot be resolved.

There are many reasons for cynicism about Middle Eastern politics, but these should not be counted among them. The Arab-Israeli conflict has sapped regimes of their legitimacy and mobilized publics; the process of reform in many countries has begun without a resolution of the conflict.